

The Location of the Island of Dibous

BENJAMIN GARSTAD

We know very little about a fourth-century figure called Theophilus the Indian. We do, however, know that Constantius II (r. 337–361) sent him on a mission to the southern Red Sea region, where he is said to have succeeded in converting the king of Himyar to Christianity. Thanks to Photius's summary of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Philostorgius, we have a relatively detailed—if abbreviated and paraphrased—description of Theophilus's doings in Arabia and neighboring regions. But not everything in this account is altogether clear. For instance, Theophilus is said to come from the otherwise unheard-of island of Dibous, but there is no indication of precisely where this island is supposed to have been. Modern conjectures as to the identity of Dibous—from the Maldives and the mouth of the Indus to Socotra and the ports of the Persian Gulf—imply assumptions about the scope of the travels of Theophilus, as well as the diplomacy of Constantius II, that have never been substantiated. New evidence that has only recently come to light allows us to bolster a case for identifying Dibous with the Farasan Islands in the Red Sea. This identification, in turn, permits us not only to reconstruct the movements of Theophilus on his mission for Constantius, but also to gain some insight into how the term “Indian” was used in the fourth century.

The church historian Philostorgius is our most substantial source for the shadowy but intriguing fourth-century figure of Theophilus the Indian and our only source for Theophilus's embassy cum missionary

journey to the lands at the far reaches of the Red Sea.¹ And he is a source we are lucky to have. Unlike the other ecclesiastical historians who cover the period of the fourth century, Philostorgius was not an adherent

1 In contrast to the rich and full account of Theophilus offered by Philostorgius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.4–6), very little information about him is to be found in other sources. Gregory of Nyssa (*C. Eunom.* 1.47) mentions him as “the Blemmyan Theophilus” (ὁ Βλέμμυς Θεόφιλος), whose penchant for novelties made him susceptible to the doctrines of Aetius, Eunomius's teacher in heresy; R. Winling, ed., *Grégoire de Nyssa, Contre Eunome* (Paris, 2008–2013), 1:146. Winling suggests that Theophilus received this nickname after he had been entrusted by the emperor with a mission to this region (147, n. 3: “Théophile porte ce surnom parce que l'empereur lui avait confié une mission dans cette region, située au-delà des cataractes du Nil”), neglecting the fact that he was a native of this same region, broadly speaking, and that the Blemmyes are not mentioned in Philostorgius's account of Theophilus's mission. S. Hall, “Translation,” in *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium I. An English Translation with Supporting Studies*, ed. M. Brugarolas (Leiden, 2018), 81, n. 21, inexplicably identifies the individual mentioned by Gregory with an altogether different Theophilus, the governor of Syria lynched in 354. Theodoret (*Hist. eccl.* 2.29 [28].3) quotes a letter from the bishops summoned by Constantius, addressed to George, the bishop of Alexandria, that names Theophilus as one of the bishops who has refused to join in their condemnation of Aetius, but this is presumably the same Theophilus discussed at length by Philostorgius; see R. Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution* (Oxford, 2000), 225–26 and n. 163, 275–77. The paucity of source material concerning Theophilus notwithstanding, he did merit an entry in the tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia, the *Suda* (© 197), which speaks of Theophilus's coming back from the Indians, but says nothing more of his embassy to the Red Sea.

of the Trinitarian doctrine as formulated at the Council of Nicaea, but rather a follower of Eunomius, bishop of Cyzicus, who taught that God the Son was like God the Father in activity and will, but not in essence (*ousia*).² While the Church histories of his Nicene contemporaries have been preserved more or less complete, we depend on an abbreviated paraphrase for Philostorgius's work. Nevertheless, we have a fairly good idea of its content, thanks to the detailed and extensive set of notes compiled by the great ninth-century scholar and patriarch Photius (ca. 810–after 893; patriarch 858–867 and again 877–886) that constitute this paraphrase, as well as a much briefer entry in Photius's *Bibliotheca*.³

Philostorgius wrote *Ecclesiastical History* from the perspective of his own party, covering the period from 315 to 425, and finished the work shortly after the last events that he describes.⁴ His account overall is something of a mirror image of the story told by the Nicene or Trinitarian church historians. The heroes and villains are reversed; the upholders of orthodoxy are heretics, and rather than going from strength to strength to become the established church of the empire, the true church is presented as a dwindling minority in a

wayward and unwelcoming world. This inversion can also be found in the selection of people and episodes to be covered. So whereas Philostorgius's Nicene Greek contemporaries Theodoret, Socrates, Sozomen, and ps.-Gelasius (all ultimately dependent on the Latin history of Rufinus) relate the adventures of Frumentius—his rise from captive to royal chamberlain to bishop, and how he was instrumental in bringing Axum, the country they call Farther India, into the Christian fold—Philostorgius does not so much as mention Frumentius, who was an acolyte of Athanasius, the champion of Nicene orthodoxy.⁵ Rather, he gives an account of Theophilus the Indian, himself a Eunomian, returning home to work as an ambassador for Constantius II and a missionary, and of the success of his endeavors, especially in the South Arabian kingdom of Himyar.

The Mission of Theophilus

Although we have several versions of the story of Frumentius in the kingdom of Axum, even if they all go back to Rufinus's account, Philostorgius alone tells us about the travels of Theophilus the Indian.⁶ He relates these events immediately after reporting how Constantius II expelled Athanasius from Alexandria and appointed George the Cappadocian archbishop of the city in his place, so there is throughout a contrast between the missionary efforts of Arians and Athanasians in the region of the Red Sea.⁷ Theophilus,

2 See M. Barnes, "Eunomius of Cyzicus and Gregory of Nyssa: Two Traditions of Transcendent Causality," *VChr* 52 (1998): 59–87; Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*; R. Van Dam, *Becoming Christian: The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia, 2003), 15–45; M. DelCogliano, "Basil of Caesarea versus Eunomius of Cyzicus on the Nature of Time: A Patristic Reception of the Critique of Plato," *VChr* 68 (2014): 498–532.

3 Photius, *Bibl. Cod.* 40. See W. Treadgold, *The Nature of the Bibliotheca of Photius* (Washington, DC, 1980), 39, 42, 53, n. 4, 98; B. Bleckmann, "Die Notizen des Photios zu Philostorgios im Kontext seiner Behandlung der spätantiken Historiographie und seiner Bildungsinteressen," in *L'historiographie tardo-antique et la transmission des savoirs*, ed. P. Blaudeau and P. Van Nuffelen (Berlin, 2015), 227–45. E. Argov, "Giving the Heretic a Voice: Philostorgius of Borissus and Greek Ecclesiastical Historiography," *Athenaeum* 89 (2001): 497–524, at 520–23, casts doubt on the Photian authorship of the epitome of Philostorgius's *Ecclesiastical History*, but does not come to any definite conclusions.

4 See A. Nobbs, "Philostorgius' View of the Past," in *Reading the Past in Late Antiquity*, ed. G. Clarke (Rushcutters Bay, 1990), 251–64; Argov, "Giving the Heretic a Voice," 497–524; P. Amidon, *Philostorgius*: Church History (Atlanta, 2007), xiii–xxv; H. Leppin, "Heretical Historiography: Philostorgius," *StP* 34 (2001) 111–24; G. Marasco, *Filostorgio. Cultura, fede e politica in uno storico ecclesiastico del V secolo*, *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 92 (Rome, 2005); D. Meyer, "Débat cosmologique et discours historique dans l'Histoire ecclésiastique de Philostorge," in Blaudeau and Van Nuffelen, *L'historiographie tardo-antique*, 191–207.

5 Rufinus, *Hist. eccl.* 10.9–10; Sozom., *Hist. eccl.* 2.24; Socrates, *Hist. eccl.* 1.19; Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* 1.23; cf. ps.-Gelasius of Cyzicus, *Hist. eccl.* 3.9.

6 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.4–6. See H. von Wissmann, *Zur Geschichte und Landeskunde von Alt-Südarabien*, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, philosophisch-historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte 246 (Vienna, 1964), 70, 76, 205; A. Dihle, "Die Sendung des Inders Theophilus," in *Politeia und Res Publica: Beiträge zum Verständnis von Politik, Recht und Staat in der Antike*, Palingenesia 4, ed. P. Steinmetz (Wiesbaden, 1969), 330–36; I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, DC, 1984), 86–106; G. Fiaccadori, "Teofilo Indiano: Parte II. Il Viaggio," *Studi Classici e Orientali* 34 (1985): 271–307; A. Dihle, "L'ambassade de Théophile l'Indien ré-examinée," in *L'Arabie préislamique et son environnement historique et culturel: Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg (24–27 juin 1987)*, ed. T. Fahd (Leiden, 1989), 461–68; G. Fiaccadori, *Teofilo Indiano* (Ravenna, 1992) 41–69; Marasco, *Filostorgio*, 117–22; M. Bukharin, "The Apostolic Mission of Theophilus the Indian," *VestDrIst* 3 (278) (2011): 174–91.

7 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.

according to Philostorgius, was sent out at the head of an embassy to the king of Himyar (modern Yemen) by Constantius II. The purpose of this embassy, Philostorgius says, was to convert the king and his subjects to Christianity, but he also notes the presence of Roman traders and their Persian competitors in Himyar, and despite his chosen emphasis he cannot have been unaware of the more worldly mercantile and political interests that the ambassadors would also have been pursuing. Theophilus was apparently selected to head the embassy because he was a native of the region; he had been born on an island named Dibous and sent as a hostage when very young to the Roman Empire. There he apparently became a Christian and a monk and was made a bishop so that he could undertake his mission with that elevated rank. His embassy was no mean affair either, as the emperor sent along two hundred thoroughbred horses from the famous Cappadocian stock as a gift for the king of Himyar.

The mission was a signal success, according to Philostorgius. The king of Himyar was persuaded to become a Christian and built three churches, not with the money that Constantius II had sent for this purpose, but with his own funds. Having arranged matters in Himyar, Theophilus traveled further throughout the region. Philostorgius—or what remains of him in the summary of Photius—is not as clear as he might be in regard to Theophilus's itinerary or the countries he visited, but Theophilus seems to have gone from Himyar first to his birthplace, the island of Dibous, and then to Axum. Our perplexity over the route stems from our ignorance of the location of the island of Dibous. We do not know for sure where this island was, but some conjectures, as we shall see, would have Theophilus traveling across the length and the breadth of the Arabian Sea simply in order to make his way from one shore of the Red Sea to the other.

In the midst of relating the embassy to Himyar and the adjacent territories, Philostorgius steps back and provides some information on Theophilus the Indian himself, for him the prime mover in this enterprise:

ταύτης τῆς πρεσβείας ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις ἦν καὶ Θεόφιλος ὁ Ἰνδός, ὃς πάλαι μὲν, Κωνσταντίνου τοῦ πάλαι βασιλεύοντος, ἔτι τὴν ἡλικίαν νεώτατος, καθ' ὁμηρίαν πρὸς τῶν Διβηνῶν καλουμένων εἰς Ῥωμαίους ἐστάλη· Διβοῦς δ' ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς ἡ

νήσος χώρα, τῶν Ἰνδῶν δὲ καὶ οὗτοι φέρουσι τὸ ἐπώνυμον.⁸

Among those in charge of this embassy was also Theophilus the Indian, who previously, when Constantine was ruling and he was still a very young man, was sent as a hostage from those called Dibenī to the Romans; Dibous is their island country, and they have the name of Indians.

Philostorgius explains the eponym applied to Theophilus the Indian by saying that it belonged to all of his countrymen. And if the authors of Late Antiquity had used the word “Indian” exclusively for the people of the Indian subcontinent—the people we have recently come to call South Asians—we might be in a better position to locate the island of Dibous with some certainty. But they did not. Rather, they applied the term “Indian” just as often, perhaps even more often, to the inhabitants of Abyssinia and South Arabia as well.⁹ Philostorgius himself refers to the Himyarites as Indians, and to “the other Indian land” (ἡ ἄλλη Ἰνδική),

8 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.4 (J. Bidez, ed., *Philostorgius Kirchengeschichte* [Leipzig, 1913], 33).

9 Though brief and now dated, the best guide to this phenomenon remains P. Mayerson, “A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources,” *JAOS* 11 (1993): 169–74. Terminology has the potential to trip us up in a discussion of this sort, and a few words of clarification are in order. “India” and “Indian” are admittedly ambiguous terms because of their late antique usage, but “South Asian” would have meant something—if it meant anything at all—entirely different in antiquity and loses the specificity of “Indian,” which means (more or less) “by the Indus,” so I have used this description sparingly. It is perhaps inconsistent then to prefer “Abyssinia,” a term unknown to the ancients, for the region of the kingdom of “Axum,” but “Ethiopia” is almost certainly bound to be confusing. Rather than the confines of the modern nation that has taken this name, in antiquity “Ethiopia” commonly referred to all the country south of Egypt or a broad stretch of territory across the whole southern portion of the African continent. In some late antique authors, “Ethiopia” and “Ethiopian” are used for the Axumite kingdom and its inhabitants; in others, they are called “India” and “Indians” to distinguish them from Ethiopia and the Ethiopians. The modern designation of “East Africa,” which might include any place on the eastern shore of Africa from Ras Kasar in Eritrea to Maputo in Mozambique and great swaths of territory inland, is far too broad when what we mean is a very specific area comprising the northern tip of the Ethiopian highlands and the adjacent coastal areas. The closest recognized designation for this area is “Abyssinia.”



Fig. 1. The Arabian Sea littoral, indicating proposed locations of the island of Dibous. Map by the author.

which appears to be Axum.¹⁰ We might have a clearer idea of what other people were called Indians in Late Antiquity if we knew where the island of Dibous was. But that is a matter of considerable disagreement.

Proposed Locations of Dibous

It is not as if the problem of locating has been neglected. There have been several proposals as to the identity of Dibous. A number of these and those most eagerly accepted, by scholars apparently induced by Theophilus's toponymic and unaware of their implications, have been inclined to place Dibous as far out in the Arabian Sea toward India as possible: Diu or Diaba at the mouth of

the Indus, Socotra, the Maldives, or the region of Dubai. (These and all other place names mentioned in the text may be located on Figure 1 or Figure 2.) But these locations stretch our evidence far too thin and have baffling implications for the account of Theophilus's mission. The whole problem was examined with vast and impeccable erudition and in the minutest detail by Gianfranco Fiaccadori, and his work still provides the most thorough bibliography on the matter as well as the background in the history of scholarship for the most recent proposals about the location of Dibous.¹¹ But more evidence has come to light since Fiaccadori wrote, and the problem needs to be reexamined. Careful scrutiny

10 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 2.6, 3.4–6.

11 G. Fiaccadori, "Teofilo Indiano: Parte I. Le origini," *Studi Classici e Orientali* 33 (1984): 295–331.



Fig. 2.
The Red Sea littoral,
indicating proposed
locations of the island
of Dibous. Map by
the author.

of Philostorgius's report shows that we should be looking for Dibous within the Red Sea. The Farasan Islands specifically are indicated by the ancient variant name for the island group, Devade, the islanders' prominence in the affairs of the sixth century, and especially the new inscriptional evidence for a Roman military presence there before the time of Theophilus.

Diu, Divu, Diaba

One of the earliest attempts to solve this problem, and a solution that has never quite disappeared, is that

Philostorgius's Dibous is actually the island of Diu or Divu at or near the mouth of the Indus.¹² This proposition's endurance, in Anglo-Saxon scholarship at any rate, probably owes something to a note in the earliest English translation of the remains of Philostorgius's *Ecclesiastical History*, by Edward Walford, an appendix to his 1855 translation of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Sozomen: "This island is said to lie in the Indian Ocean, near the mouth of the Indus, and to have been known

12 Fiaccadori, "Teofilo Indiano: Parte I," 300.

also under the name of Diva, Divu, and Devu.”¹³ The modern Indian town of Diu, a former Portuguese colony at the southern tip of the Kathiawar Peninsula, is only one of several possible locations under this identification, since it takes its name from *dvīpa*, the Sanskrit word for island, as might practically any other island along the coast. Jehan Desanges modified this interpretation by identifying Dibous (or “Dibos,” as he took it) with the Diaba of the late antique *Itineraries from the Paradise of Eden to the Land of the Romans* (Ὅδοιπορίαι ἀπὸ Ἐδέμ τοῦ παραδείσου ἄχρι τῶν Ῥωμαίων), or *Hodoiporiai*, a severely abbreviated Greek version of the text better preserved as the Latin *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*.¹⁴ On the itinerary of the *Hodoiporiai*, Diaba is the last port of call before the westbound traveler proceeds to “Great India”—the Indian subcontinent, as opposed to “Little India,” which comes after Axum on the itinerary—and then on to Axum. Desanges proposed that both place names, “Dibos” and Diaba, indicated some coastal island or peninsula near where the Indus flows into the sea near Karachi, or perhaps as far afield as the desolate coast of Gedrosia (modern Balochistan in southwest Pakistan) or the shores of the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁵

13 E. Walford, *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen, Comprising a History of the Church from A.D. 324 to A.D. 444: Translated from the Greek with a Memoir of the Author, Also the Ecclesiastical History of Philostorgius, as Epitomised by Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople* (London, 1855), 444, n. 1.

14 Hod. 27–30 (ed. J. Rougé, ed., *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, SC 124 [Paris, 1966], 352. On the tradition of the *Expositio* and related texts, see A. Vasiliev, “Expositio totius mundi: An Anonymous Geographic Treatise of the Fourth Century A.D.,” *SemKond* 8 (1936): 1–39; Mayerson, “A Confusion of Indias,” 170–71; G. Marasco, “L’*Expositio totius mundi et gentium* e la politica religiosa di Costanzo II,” *Ancient Society* 27 (1996): 183–203; P. Mittag, “Zu den Quellen der *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*: Ein neuer Periplus?” *Hermes* 134 (2006): 338–51.

15 J. Desanges, “Une mention altérée d’Axoum dans l’*Expositio totius mundi et gentium*,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 7 (1967): 141–55, at 146–48; cf. Fiaccadori, “Teofilo Indiano: Parte I,” 305–8. Desanges gives no indication of why he insisted on referring to the island of Dibos (Διβός), since it is clear from the passage quoted above (Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.4) that Photius, and so presumably Philostorgius, took Dibous (Διβούς) as the nominative form of the island’s name, but Desanges was followed in this inexplicable idiosyncrasy by Shahîd (see below); cf. J. Desanges, *Recherches sur l’activité des Méditerranéens aux confins d’Afrique (VI^e siècle avant J.-C.–IV^e siècle après J.-C.)*, Collection de l’École française de Rome 38 (Rome, 1978), 347 n. 244, 356, 359, n. 310.

Socotra

Albrecht Dihle favored the explanation that Dibous was identical with the island of Socotra (now belonging to Yemen), some way off Cape Guardafui beyond the Gulf of Aden in the Arabian Sea.¹⁶ The principal grounds for this identification were Dihle’s claim that Dibous or Dibos could be derived from *Dvīpa Sukhādhāra*, the supposed Sanskrit name for the island, which was said to give rise to the Greek name for Socotra, that is, Dioskoros. This is also the view adopted in the notes to the current French translation of Philostorgius.¹⁷ Socotra does go under the name of Dioskoridou or Dioscorides in the ancient Mediterranean sources.¹⁸ But Walter Müller has effectively demolished the theory that there was any connection between Sanskrit words and any name applied to Socotra.¹⁹ The toponym *Dvīpa Sukhādhāra* does not occur in any Sanskrit text; it is rather an invention of Western scholars. Ingo Strauch has surveyed the origin, growth, and perpetuation of this “academic myth” to offer a salutary warning that careless repetition can turn an impressive theory into a hollow fact and distort a hypothesis into evidence among even the most erudite scholars.²⁰

Beyond the false etymology of Dioskoros from the unattested Sanskrit *Dvīpa Sukhādhāra*, Dihle offered further reasons for considering the Dibous mentioned by Philostorgius to be Socotra. He suggested that Theophilus the Indian’s ethnonym could come from his descent from the Indian population settled on Socotra, as noted in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, and Theophilus’s leadership of the mission Constantius sent would reflect the Christianization of Socotra and its close ties with the Roman Empire, for which he claims Cosmas Indicopleustes can be brought

16 A. Dihle, *Umstrittene Daten: Untersuchungen zum Auftreten der Griechen am Roten Meer* (Köln and Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1965) 38, 50, n. 52; Dihle, “Die Sendung,” 330; Dihle, “L’ambassade de Théophile,” 461; cf. Fiaccadori, “Teofilo Indiano: Parte I,” 300–301, 305.

17 É. Des Places et al., *Philostorge, Histoire Ecclésiastique*, SC 564 (Paris, 2013) 246, n. 1.

18 E.g., *Peripl. M. Rubr.* 30; Cosmas Indic., *Topogr. Christ.* 3.65.

19 W. Müller, “Antike und mittelalterliche Quellen als Zeugnisse über Soqotra, eine einstmals christliche Insel,” *OC* 85 (2001): 139–61, at 151–52.

20 I. Strauch, *Foreign Sailors on Socotra: The Inscriptions and Drawings from the Cave Hoq* (Bremen, 2012), 397–403.

into evidence.²¹ What Cosmas, or rather the text of the *Christian Topography* that goes under his name, actually says is:

ὁμοίως καὶ ἐν τῇ νήσῳ τῇ καλουμένῃ Διοσκορίδους κατὰ τὸ αὐτὸ Ἰνδικὸν πέλαγος, ἔνθα καὶ οἱ παροικοῦντες ἑλληνιστὶ λαλοῦσι, πάροικοι τῶν Πτολεμαίων τῶν μετὰ Ἀλέξανδρον τὸν Μακεδόνα ὑπάρχοντες, καὶ κληρικοὶ εἰσιν ἐκ Περσίδος χειροτονούμενοι καὶ πεμπόμενοι ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῖσι καὶ χριστιανοὶ πλῆθος· ἦν νήσον παρέπλευσα μέν, οὐ κατήλθον δὲ ἐν αὐτῇ· συνέντευχον δὲ ἀνδράσι τῶν ἐκεῖ ἑλληνιστὶ λαλοῦσιν, ἐλθοῦσιν ἐν τῇ Αἰθιοπία.²²

And likewise on the island called Dioscorides in this Indian Sea those who settled there also speak Greek—they are settlers of the Ptolemies[, who ruled] after Alexander of Macedon—the clergy are ordained out of Persia and sent to them; there is a great crowd of Christians there. I sailed along this island, but did not disembark at it. But I did converse with some men from there who spoke Greek and had come to Ethiopia.

Although Cosmas does note that Socotra had a sizeable Christian population in his day, that is, the first half of the sixth century, he says nothing about this inclining them to a friendly disposition toward the Romans; on the contrary, he says that their clergy were ordained in Persia. Philostorgius himself, moreover, appears to suggest that Theophilus came to the Christian faith while a hostage amongst the Romans, not beforehand in his homeland.²³

21 Dihle, *Umstrittene Daten*, 38, 50, n. 52; Dihle, “Die Sendung,” 330; Dihle, “L’ambassade de Théophile,” 461; cf. Fiaccadori, “Teofilo Indiano: Parte I,” 300–301, 305.

22 Cosmas Indic., *Topogr. Christ.* 3.65 (W. Wolska-Conus, ed., *Cosmas Indicopleustès Topographie chrétienne*, SC 141, 159, 197 [Paris, 1968–1973], 1:503–5).

23 This is another matter on which we could wish for greater clarity from the remnants of Philostorgius. What is related by Photius is that “this Theophilus spent no little time among the Romans” and—apparently consequently—“trained his mode of life toward virtue of the most excellent sort and his doctrine unto piety” (τὸν μέντοι Θεόφιλον, οὐκ ὀλίγον Ῥωμαίοις ἐνδιατρήσαντα χρόνον, τὰ τε ἦθῃ πρὸς ἀρετὴν εἰς τὸ ἀκρότατον ρυθμίσαι καὶ τὴν δόξαν πρὸς εὐσέβειαν); Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.4 (Bidez, *Philostorgius*, 33). The first objective might mean that Theophilus embraced the religious

Mikhail Bukharin accepted the identification of Dibous with Socotra—although he admitted that it “can be deduced only from indirect arguments”—apparently because it provides a context for what seems to be a Christian inscription found in the Hoq cave on the island.²⁴ The inscription is brief and one of only two in Greek amid a much greater number of informal inscriptions written in various Indian languages and dialects. Bukharin reconstructs the inscription thus: (1) μνηθῇ (2) Ἀλέξαν(3)δρος Πέτ(ρ)(4)ος, and offers three possible translations: “Let Alexandros, [son of] Petros, be remembered” / “Let Alexandros, [baptised] Petros, be remembered” / “Let Alexandros be remembered. Petros.”²⁵ Each of Bukharin’s translations is a more or less remote possibility and at least two presume a basic error in grammar and orthography; he does not entertain the possibility that an individual with a simple double name, Alexandros Petros (or Alexander Peter), hopes to be remembered. That one of the names in the inscription is Peter all but confirms that this Alexander had some Christian connection. This inscription does nothing to confirm, however, that Dibous was actually Socotra, but rather serves as a reminder of just how tenuous some of the evidence called in defense of this proposition really is. In a study devoted to the island of Socotra and its historical Christian population, Zoltán Biedermann summarily rejects the identification of Dibous with Socotra and characterizes the whole scholarship on what he considers an artificially inflated question as rich in hypotheses that fall wide of the mark.²⁶

life, and the second, as Philostorgius is the source, that he adopted the teaching of Eunomius, but as a whole, Theophilus’s progress in the training Philostorgius describes might also refer to his conversion to Christianity from a paganism very similar to the sort that Philostorgius ascribes to the Homerites, which involved worship of the sun and moon and the native *daimones* of the country (3.4).

24 Bukharin, “Apostolic Mission,” 177–79; M. Bukharin, “The Mediterranean World and Socotra,” in Strauch, *Foreign Sailors on Socotra*, 493–539, at 523–26. On the study of the inscriptions in the Hoq cave, see R. Salomon, rev. of Ingo Strauch, *Foreign Sailors on Socotra*, *Indo-Iranian Journal* 57 (2014): 277–82; K. Evers, “Cave of Revelations: Indian Ocean Trade in Light of the Socotran Graffiti,” *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology* 10–11 (2014–2015) 19–37.

25 Bukharin, “Mediterranean World and Socotra,” 144, 494–95.

26 Z. Biedermann, *Socotra: Geschichte einer christlichen Insel im Indischen Ozean vom Altertum bis zur frühen Neuzeit* (Wiesbaden, 2006) 41, n. 14: “Die Literatur zu dieser künstlich aufgebauchten Frage ist reich an Hypothesen.”

The Maldives

After an exhaustive review of previous scholarship, Fiacadori found himself in agreement with no less a luminary than Edward Gibbon and considered Dibous to be most likely identified with the Maldives archipelago, off the southwest tip of India.²⁷ Gibbon wrote:

Theophilus had been given in his infancy as a hostage by his countrymen of the isle of Diva, and was educated by the Romans in learning and piety. The Maldives, of which Male, or *Diva*, may be the capital, are a cluster of 1900 or 2000 minute islands in the Indian Ocean. The ancients were imperfectly acquainted with the Maldives, but they are described in the two Mahometan travellers of the ninth century, published by Renaudot.²⁸

Fiacadori notes that the Roman-era Mediterranean world had some knowledge of the Maldives, and they seem to have been mentioned by Ptolemy, Palladius, and Cosmas Indicopleustes, but his identification of Dibous with the Maldives largely depends on later Arabic travel literature.²⁹ The imprimatur of Gibbon cannot have hurt, but the general acceptance of the identification of Dibous with the Maldives in English-speaking scholarship has no doubt profited from the endorsement of Alexander Kazhdan and Leslie MacCoull in their entry on “Theophilus the Indian” in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*.³⁰

The Tripolis of Dibā or Dubai

After beginning to assemble a good case for identifying Dibous—or Dibos as he would have it—as an island in the Red Sea, Irfan Shahīd opted rather for locating Dibous somewhere near the entrance to the Persian Gulf, pointing to the *tripolis* of Dibā (consisting of Dibā al-Bī’a, Dibā al-Ḥiṣn, and Dibā al-Ghurfa) on the Gulf of Oman or Dubai within the Strait of Hormuz

as possibilities.³¹ He notes “the striking phonetic correspondence between these toponyms and Dibos” and the early attestations of these place names. The latter point, however, is weakened since, along with a fairly secure reference to Dibā in the correspondence of Muhammad, he offers the far from certain identification of Diaba in the *Hodoiporiai* as the same place.³² The places Shahīd indicates are moreover not islands, as he himself admits, but mainland ports. The crucial weakness in Shahīd’s location of Dibous at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, though, is that it would bring an emissary of the Roman emperor perilously close to Persian territory. That does not make the location impossible, but it does raise all sorts of unanswered questions about diplomatic immunity and spheres of influence on the late antique Arabian Sea. Nevertheless, Shahīd is almost certainly right to conclude that Theophilus’s epithet “the Indian” designates him a “Southern Semite” rather than an Indian in our modern sense.

All of the foregoing interpretations tend to shift the location of Dibous Island as far eastward and as far toward subcontinental India as they can, as if to explain Theophilus’s toponymic “the Indian” as referring, if possible, to the commonly understood India.³³ In doing so, they ignore the general tendency in Late Antiquity to apply the term “Indian” to Abyssinians and South Arabians quite as much as to South Asians. They also ignore critical pieces of internal evidence and at least one piece of external evidence regarding Philostorgius’s own identification of Theophilus and his homeland. Before we can turn to this evidence, however, and ascertain its true value, it will be necessary for us to determine the route that Theophilus followed in his travels, as described by Philostorgius.

31 Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, 97–100. A search in this locality is based on Shahīd’s understanding (*Byzantium and the Arabs*, 89–90 and n. 59) that the third church founded by Theophilus in the realm of the Homerites, the one “at the Persian market,” was very close to the entrance to the Persian Gulf. As mentioned above, Shahīd followed Desanges in calling the island Dibos rather than Dibous, but neither gives a good reason for doing so.

32 See above, p. 84.

33 It would be unfair to the tremendous scholarship of Fiacadori to suggest that his views might be swayed by a sentiment like patriotism, but a predisposition to cast the foreign relations of the Roman Empire as far afield as possible might be revealed when he says (Fiacadori, “Teofilo Indiano: Parte II,” 286) “La priorità di Roma nell’esplorazione dell’Estremo Oriente è rivendicata dal racconto pliniano.”

27 Fiacadori, “Teofilo Indiano: Parte I,” 309–28.

28 E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York, 1977), 1:656–57, n. 80 (chap. 20).

29 Ptol., *Geog.* 7.4.11; Palladius, *VB* 1.5; Cosmas Indic., *Topogr. Christ.* 11.13; see Fiacadori, “Teofilo Indiano: Parte I,” 315–16.

30 A. Kazhdan and L. MacCoull, “Theophilus the Indian,” *ODB* 3:2067. See also Amidon, *Philostorgius*, 40, n. 8.

“The Other India,” Axum, and a Location within the Red Sea for Dibous

Philostorgius does not explicitly specify where Dibous was, but he does say that once his work was done in the land of the Homerites, as he—along with several other late antique authors—calls the contemporary Himyarites, Theophilus sailed from there to the island of Dibous, his homeland, and proceeded to “the other India” or “the rest of the Indian country”:

ὁ μέντοι Θεόφιλος, τὰ ἐν τοῖς Ὀμηρίταις ὡς ἑκα-
στα δυνατὸν ἦν καὶ ὁ καιρὸς ἐδίδου διαθείς, καὶ τὰς
ἐκκλησίας ἱερωσάμενος καὶ κόσμοις οἷς ἐνῆν δυνα-
τὸν διακοσμήσας, ἐπὶ τὴν Δίβου νῆσον, ἣν αὐτοῦ
πατρίδα προεδίδαξεν ὁ λόγος, ἀπέπλευσεν. κάκειθεν
εἰς τὴν ἄλλην ἀφίκετο Ἰνδικήν, καὶ πολλὰ τῶν παρ’
αὐτοῖς οὐκ εὐαγῶς δρωμένων ἐπηγωνίσασατο.³⁴

At any rate, Theophilus, once he had arranged matters amongst the Homerites, each as he was able and opportunity allowed, and had consecrated the churches and dressed them with such decorations as he was able, sailed away to the island of Dibous, which, as the account stated beforehand, was his fatherland. And from there he came to the other Indian land and set aright many of the things not done by them in a pure and holy fashion.

This might suggest that Dibous was indeed somewhere near India proper or on the way there, but when Philostorgius reiterates the route of Theophilus in the very next chapter, he says that he left Great Arabia and went to the Axumites and makes no mention of Dibous:

ἐκ δὲ ταύτης τῆς μεγάλης Ἀραβίας εἰς τοὺς
Αὐξουμίτας καλουμένους ἀπαίρει Αἰθίοπας, οἱ
κατὰ τὰς πρώτας ὄχθας κατῴκηνται τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς

34 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.5 (Bidez, *Philostorgius*, 35). The text as printed in Des Places et al. (*Philostorge, Histoire Ecclésiastique*, 250), silently adds an accent to the ἦν in Bidez’s text to read δυνατὸν ἦν καὶ ὁ καιρὸς, and I have followed suit. As Bidez (*Philostorgius*, 33) notes, the best manuscript is inconsistent in accenting the name of the island of Dibous, giving διβούς for the nominative at 3.4 (as quoted above) and διβου for the genitive here at 3.5. Both cannot be correct, and Bidez (*Philostorgius*, 35) corrected the latter Δίβου to Διβοῦ in the apparatus criticus.

θαλάσσης, ἣν ὁ ταύτη Ὠκεανὸς εἰσκολπιζόμενος
ἐργάζεται πᾶσαν.³⁵

He departed from this Great Arabia to the Ethiopians [who are] called Axumites, who live along the first shores of the Red Sea, which the Ocean has formed entirely by hollowing a gulf out of the coast at this place.

This indicates that Dibous was on the route from Himyar to the kingdom of Axum (straddling the modern border between Ethiopia and Eritrea) and that visiting the island represented an insignificant stopover rather than a lengthy detour out into the Arabian Sea. The most sensible route from Himyar to Axum and the one a reader might assume, especially for a sea voyage, would be across the Red Sea from somewhere along the coast of Arabia to Adulis (modern Zula), the port of Axum. That Theophilus did not pass beyond the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and outside the confines of the Red Sea appears to be confirmed when Philostorgius reports that while Theophilus visited the Axumites he did not go as far as the so-called Syrians, who lived to the east of them on the shores of the Ocean (πρότεροι δὲ τούτων τῶν Αὐξουμιτῶν ἐπὶ τὸν ἐξωτάτω πρὸς ἀνατολὰς καθήκοντες Ὠκεανὸν παροικοῦσιν οἱ Σύροι).³⁶ Moreover, Philostorgius may call Theophilus an Indian, but Gregory of Nyssa refers to him as a Blemmyan.³⁷ The Blemmyes were an African people who rose to prominence in Late Antiquity and dwelt between the borders of Roman Egypt and the Axumite kingdom and the Nile Valley and the Red Sea.³⁸ Gregory of Nyssa’s

35 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.6 (Bidez, *Philostorgius*, 35).

36 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.6 (Bidez, *Philostorgius*, 35).

37 Greg. Nyss., *C. Eunom.* 1.47.

38 The country of the Blemmyes is usually said to sit between the Nile and the Red Sea and between Egypt and Abyssinia; see Fiacadori, “Teofilo Indiano: Parte II,” 289–90; R. Pierce, “A Blemmy by Any Other Name . . . : A Study in Greek Ethnography,” in *The History of the Peoples of the Eastern Desert*, ed. H. Barnard and K. Duistermaat (Los Angeles, 2012), 227–37, at 231–37; J. Dijkstra, “Blemmyes, Noubades and the Eastern Desert in Late Antiquity: Reassessing the Written Sources,” in Barnard and Duistermaat, *Peoples of the Eastern Desert*, 239–47; D. Gigli, “I Blemi alle frontiere dell’Alto Egitto nella letteratura tardoantica,” in *De Opos a Limes: El concepto de frontera en el mundo antiguo y su recepción*, ed. M. Fernández and D. Hernández de la Fuente (Madrid, 2017), 91–103; H. Cuvigny, “Trogodytes et Blemmyes, entre documents et littérature,” in *Blemmyes: New Documents and New Perspectives, Including O.Blem. 1–107*, ed. H. Cuvigny (Cairo, 2022),

epithet for Theophilus suggests that we should look to the Red Sea, one of the boundaries of Blemmyan territory, for his homeland.

As mentioned above, Irfan Shahîd made a start on a case for identifying Dibous as an island in the Red Sea.³⁹ He recalled the possibility of an aggressive Roman naval presence in these waters in the reign of Constantine (306–337, though the Red Sea littoral would only have been under his jurisdiction after his defeat of Licinius in 324), which might have anticipated the better-documented Byzantine intervention in the region under Justin I (r. 518–527), as a plausible context for Theophilus's being handed over to the Romans as a hostage.⁴⁰ But he abandoned this tack, claiming, "There is, however, no island that carries the name Dibos or one reasonably near it in the Red Sea."⁴¹ As we shall see, however, this is not actually the case, even if it was in keeping with the best information available to Shahîd when he wrote. Nor, as he preferred to locate Dibous at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, did Shahîd have to specify any particular place in or on the Red Sea as Dibous.

There has been no shortage of suggestions locating the island of Dibous in the waters of the Red Sea, even if they have not received the attention that Theophilus's route as reported by Philostorgius shows they deserve. Eduard Glaser associated Dibous with the Debai, an Arab tribe of nomads and farmers mentioned by the Hellenistic author Artemidorus, and situated both on the Arabian shore of the Red Sea near the modern site of Al Qunfudhah.⁴² Carlo Conti Rossini pointed out the obvious problems with this identification—namely,

that Glaser has confused the names of a tribe and an island and that Al Qunfudhah is a coastal town, not an island, but he conceded that it was at least more sensible than the suggestion of Socotra, since it was not improbable that the Romans should take hostages from a nearby people notorious for their piracy, and he accepted this identification.⁴³ Antoine-Jean Letronne set considerable store by the fact that Gregory of Nyssa calls Theophilus a Blemmyan, and tried to locate the Arian missionary's island home as close to the African mainland as possible, selecting the island of Dahlak as the site of Philostorgius's Dibous.⁴⁴ Dahlak is indisputably an island and lies barely ten miles north of the Buri Peninsula, which encloses the Gulf of Zula, on which Adulis sits, and it would hardly be possible to sail into Adulis without at least catching sight of it, if not sailing along its shores. Dahlak is thus an eminently plausible candidate for the location of Dibous, but it is not the only one.

The Farasans

The simple fact that the Farasan Islands are among the few islands or archipelagos in the Red Sea presents them as a possibility immediately, but the accumulation of evidence indicates that they should indeed be identified with Philostorgius's Dibous. The modern Farasan Islands are a coral island group with one main island, a somewhat smaller second island close enough to be connected to the first by road in the present day, and several much smaller islands surrounding them, off the southern reaches of Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coastline. The Farasan Islands were known in antiquity as *Ferresanus Portus*, but it would appear they should also be identified with Pliny the Elder's *insula Devade*, a name of which Dibous could easily be a variant. There is new evidence for a Roman military presence on the

41–59. T. Power, "You Shall Not See the Tribes of the Blemmyes or of the Saracens': On the Other 'Barbarians' of the Late Roman Eastern Desert of Egypt," in Barnard and Duistermaat, *Peoples of the Eastern Desert*, 323–39, reminds us that the Blemmyes and Nobades were not the only peoples to be found in Egypt's eastern desert in Late Antiquity. The Blemmyes, under the name of the Beja, continued to be hostile and troublesome neighbors after the Muslim caliphate took power over Egypt; see T. Power, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate, AD 500–1000* (Cairo, 2012), 135–40.

39 Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, 97.

40 Cf. Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, 38–43, 53, n. 93.

41 Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, 97; other proposals as to the identity of Dibous are reviewed at 97, n. 84.

42 E. Glaser, *Die Abessinier in Arabien und Afrika: Auf Grund neuer entdeckter Inschriften* (Munich, 1895), 167; cf. Fiaccadori, "Teofilo Indiano: Parte I," 301–3. See Artemidorus = Strabo, 16.4.18; cf. Agatharchides of Cnidus F 97 = Diod. Sic., 3.45.3–5; Photius, *Bibl.* 250.95 (457b–458a); von Wissmann, *Alt-Südarabien*, 157; S. Burstein,

Agatharchides of Cnidus, On the Erythraean Sea (London, 1989), 156–57.

43 C. Conti Rossini, "Un documento sul Cristianesimo nello Iemen ai tempi del re Šarāḥbīl Yakkuf," *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* 19 (1910): 705–50, at 707, n.1; C. Conti Rossini, *Storia d'Etiopia: Parte prima. Dalle origini all'avvento della dinastia Salomonide* (Milano, 1928), 150; cf. Fiaccadori, "Teofilo Indiano: Parte I," 303.

44 A.-J. Letronne, "Memoire où l'on discute la réalité d'une mission arienne exécutée dans l'Inde sous le règne de l'empereur Constance," *Mémoires d'Académie royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 10 (1833): 218–48, at 243–47; cf. Fiaccadori, "Teofilo Indiano: Parte I," 301.

Farasans as early as the second century, which would be consistent with Theophilus's arrival in the Roman Empire as a hostage. Several sources from the sixth century indicate that the Farasan Islands were a major player in Red Sea affairs, enough to warrant diplomatic visits, and this may very well have been true earlier in the fourth century as well.

The *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World* identifies the *insula Devade* mentioned by Pliny with the Farasan Islands.⁴⁵ The *Atlas* labels the Farasans the *Devade Inss.*, or "the Devade Islands," and I can only assume this is the modern cartographer's acknowledgment that the Farasans are actually an archipelago, since Pliny speaks of only one island in the singular. In antiquity, the Farasans were apparently seen as one principal island, and the surrounding islets were subsumed under the designation of the one island. Like Pliny, Philostorgius refers to a single island of Dibous, so there is no reason to think that they are not referring to the same place. Certainly, that we now speak of the Farasan Islands in the plural should not preclude an identification.

The *Atlas's* identification of the Farasan Islands with Pliny's *insula Devade* seems to depend on a discussion of the sites along this stretch of coastline by Hermann von Wissmann.⁴⁶ Von Wissmann, however, does not actually give a modern equivalent for the *insula Devade*, and its location must be inferred from his identification of other sites mentioned in the same context, which must have been nearby.⁴⁷ In fact, the map that von Wissmann includes with his discussion seems to suggest that—with some hesitation; the name is followed by a question mark—he identified an island of Dibe (?) with the island group of Thara Major and Thara Minor, northwest of Al Qunfudhah (Fig. 3).⁴⁸ But if Philostorgius's Dibous supported a population, to say nothing of one substantial enough to have hostages required by the Romans, it could hardly be identified

with the Tharas, which are desolate and uninhabited today. It is far more likely to have been the Farasan Islands, whose inhabitants were active players in the politics of the sixth-century Red Sea, as we shall see, and which at present have a population of around 20,000.

The Farasan Islands are not necessarily on the route from Himyar to Axum, unless we assume that Theophilus was operating in the north of Himyarite territory or making some effort to remain in contact with the Roman bases in Arabia Petraea. But the fact that Theophilus was inclined to go first to Himyar and then Axum might suggest that he was more comfortable on the eastern than the western shore of the Red Sea, and thus that his home country was nearer to the Arabian than the African coast—that is, the Farasan Islands rather than Dahlak Island. Moreover, while the ancient name of Dahlak was "the Islands called Alalaïou" or "of Alalaïos" (νησοὶ Ἀλαλαίου λεγόμενοι) or *insulae quae Aliaeu vocantur*, which is nothing like Dibous, the name given to the Farasans, *Devade*, and Dibous could easily be two forms of the same name.⁴⁹

Perhaps most decisively, we have concrete evidence of the Roman occupation of the Farasan Islands in the form of two second-century Latin inscriptions, one commemorating the construction of a fort.⁵⁰ Such

49 *Peripl. M. Rubr.* 4; Plin., *HN* 6.(34) 173; Ptol., *Geog.* 6.7.43; see M. Bukharin, "The [*sic*] Coastal Arabia and the adjacent Sea-Basins in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (Trade, Geography and Navigation)," *Topoi* suppl. 11 (2012): 177–236, at 211–12.

50 Since these inscriptions were first published they have generated an impressive quantity of scholarship, but this is almost entirely concerned with specific readings of the texts and how our understanding of the Roman presence in the Red Sea is to be reinterpreted in light of them, and does not address the relation of *portus Ferresanus* to Pliny's *insula Devade*: C. Phillips, F. Villeneuve, and W. Facey, "A Latin Inscription from South Arabia," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 34 (2004): 239–50; F. Villeneuve, "Une inscription latine sur l'archipel Farasân, Arabie Séoudite, sud de la mer Rouge," *CRAI* 148 (2004): 419–29; M. Speidel, "Außerhalb des Reiches? Zu neuen lateinischen Inschriften aus Saudi-Arabien und zur Ausdehnung der römischen Herrschaft am Roten Meer," *ZPapEpig* 163 (2007): 296–306, at 297–301; F. Villeneuve, "L'armée romaine en mer Rouge et autour de la mer Rouge aux II^eme et III^eme siècles apr. J.-C.: à propos de deux inscriptions latines découvertes sur l'archipel Farasan," in *The Late Roman Army in the Near East from Diocletian to the Arab Conquest*, ed. A. Lewin and P. Pellegrini (Oxford, 2007), 13–27; M. Bukharin, "A New Latin Inscription from the [*sic*] South Arabia (Classical Historical Geography and Roman Law in the [*sic*] light of the New Epigraphical Document)," *VestDrIst* 2.273 (2010): 114–37; M. Bukharin, "Roman Penetration into the Southern Red Sea and the Aksumite Campaign in West Arabia (Reconsideration

45 Plin., *HN* 6.(32) 150. D. Potts, "Arabia-Azania," in *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, ed. R. Talbert (Princeton, 2000), Map 4 (B2).

46 D. Potts et al., "Devade Islands: A Pleiades Place Resource," *Pleiades: A Gazetteer of Past Places*, 2019: <https://pleiades.stoa.org/places/39337>.

47 H. von Wissmann, "De Mari Erythraeo," in *Herman Lautensach-Festschrift*, Stuttgarter geographische Studien 69, ed. H. Wilhelm (Stuttgart, 1957), 289–324, at 300.

48 Von Wissmann, "De Mari Erythraeo," 295.

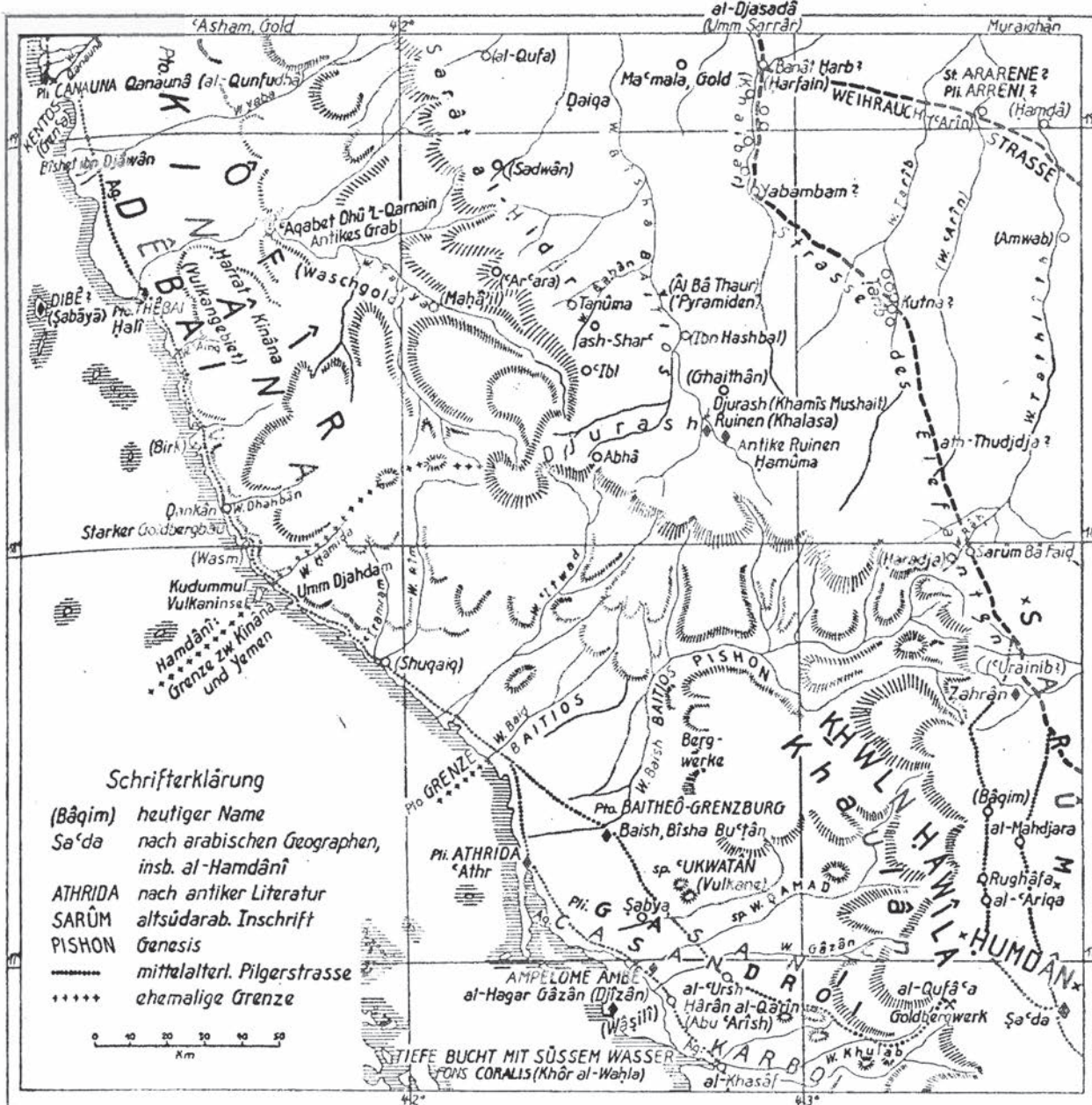


Fig. 3. The Red Sea as depicted in H. von Wissmann, "De Mari Erythraeo," in *Herman Lautensach-Festschrift*, Stuttgarter geographische Studien 69, ed. H. Wilhelmy (Stuttgart, 1957), 289–324, at 295, fig. 2.

of the Latin Dedicatory Inscription from the Farasān Archipelago): Part 1," *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology* 6–7 (2009–2010): 86–132; M. Bukharin, "Roman Penetration into the Southern Red Sea and the Aksumite Campaign in West Arabia (Reconsideration of the Latin Dedicatory Inscription from the Farasān Archipelago): Part 2," *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology* 7 (2011): 1–24; J. Cooper and C. Zazzaro, "The Farasan Islands, Saudi Arabia: Towards a Chronology of Settlement," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 25

(2014): 147–74, at 149, 150, 172; D. Nappo, “Roman Policy on the Red Sea in the Second Century CE,” in *Across the Ocean: Nine Essays on Indo-Mediterranean Trade*, ed. F. De Romanis and M. Maiuro (Leiden, 2015), 55–72, at 65–68; M. Speidel, “Fernhandel und Freundschaft zu Roms *Amici* an den Handelsrouten nach Südarabien und Indien,” *Orbis Terrarum* 14 (2016): 155–93, at 157–65; M. Speidel, “From Nabataea to Arabia: Some Economic Consequences of Becoming a Roman Frontier Province in the East,” in *Economia e*

a military presence would be consistent with a later demand for hostages, and points to Farasan as the homeland of Theophilus.⁵¹ This archaeological evidence was unavailable to Fiaccadori when he published his authoritative conclusions on the matter; if it had been, his views might have been duly modified.

The Farasan Islands, moreover, continued to play an important part in the affairs of the Red Sea long after the time of Theophilus's mission. According to the account of the sixth-century Axumite conquest of Himyar in the *Martyrdom of Arethas*, the Farasan Islands contributed seven ships to the flotilla of sixty vessels with which Caleb, the king of Axum, invaded Himyar.⁵² It is clear that this was a contingent of significant size when it is compared to the contributions of major Roman ports like Aela (fifteen ships), Clysma (twenty ships), Iotabe (seven ships), and especially Berenice (two ships). The Roman ambassador Nonnosus also visited the Farasan Islands on his return journey from Axum in the reign of Justinian (527–565), and though he seems to have been most interested in the savage pygmies he observed at the extremities of the archipelago, his landfall indicates that the Farasan Islands were still important enough to require an imperial envoy to pay a courtesy call there.⁵³

Timothy Power has misconstrued Nonnosus's description of the short, dark, and hairy people he saw, as reported by Photius, as representative of the Farasan Islands as a whole, and so indicative of what he takes to

be the military and commercial decline of the islands and the possible abandonment of any outpost that may have been there.⁵⁴ Photius, however, is explicit that Nonnosus encountered these remarkable creatures only "as he was sailing away from Farasan, when he arrived at the last of the islands" or possibly "the end of the islands" (ἀπὸ τῆς Φαρσάν πλέοντι τῷ Nonνόσῳ, ἐπὶ τὴν ἐσχάτην τῶν νήσων κατηντηκότι).⁵⁵ Nonnosus's visit, moreover, would have occurred within a matter of only a few years of the Farasan Islands' contributing seven ships to Caleb's fleet—hardly a sign of decline and insignificance. The prominence of the Farasans in the events of the sixth century makes it likely that they could have had a similar importance two centuries earlier—the sort of importance that Philostorgius imputes to the island of Dibous.

The weight of the cumulative evidence, then, indicates that we should identify Philostorgius's Dibous with the Farasan Islands. Everything from the similarity between Dibous and the name of Pliny's *insula Devade* to the proximity to Himyar, the epigraphic evidence of earlier Roman occupation, and the indications of continued political prominence points in the same direction. But by this point, even the most generous reader might wonder if we have accomplished anything beyond establishing a bit of geographical trivia. Nailing down the identity of the island of Dibous, however, does have some significant implications. It allows us to determine just how Philostorgius used the word "Indian" and what precisely he meant by it, which can be confusing in late antique texts. If we assert that Theophilus himself was Philostorgius's principal source for his account of Theophilus's mission—and I maintain that we have good reason to do so—then we also have some explanation for why Philostorgius is so vague about the location of Dibous. We also see that "Indian" was not only a term the Greeks and Romans used for the peoples of the southern Red Sea regions, but also a term those peoples used for themselves, at least when they were addressing the Greeks and Romans. Finally, we gain a proper sense of the scope of Roman diplomatic ambitions and endeavors in the Indian Ocean world during the reign of Constantius II.

Frontiera nell'Impero Romano, ed. D. Nappo and G. Merola (Bari, 2021), 95–109, at 101–3; M. Bukharin, "Towards the Readings [sic] of the Inscription ZPE-163-00 from the Farasan Islands," *Oriental Epigraphy* 36 (2021): 21–24.

51 According to the description of ps.-Hyginus (*De munitione castrorum* 18), which may have been written at roughly the same time as the Farasan inscriptions, the standard layout of a Roman camp included a place for housing hostages at the central *praetorium*; see J. Allen, *Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2006), 87. This would suggest that the establishment of Roman garrisons and the taking of hostages from the local population, to some extent, went hand in hand.

52 *Martyrium S. Arethas* 29 (M. Detoraki, ed., *Le Martyre de Saint Aréthas et de ses Compagnons*, BHG 166 [Paris, 2007] 263).

53 Nonnosus = Phot., *Bibl.* 3 (3A). On the embassy of Nonnosus, see W. Treadgold, *The Early Byzantine Historians* (Basingstoke, 2007), 256–58; G. Bowersock, "Nonnosus and Byzantine Diplomacy in Arabia," *RSI* 124 (2012): 282–90; G. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford, 2013), 108–9, 135–43.

54 Power, *The Red Sea*, 63–65.

55 Nonnosus = Phot., *Bibl.* 3 (3A) (R. Henry, ed., *Photius, Bibliothèque*, 2nd ed. [Paris, 2003] 1:7).

The Farasans as Indian

Philostorgius quite clearly connects Theophilus's country of origin, the island of Dibous, with his epithet of "the Indian," an ethnonym shared by all of his countrymen. So by establishing that Dibous was Farasan we gain a clearer idea of whom he considered to be Indians and how he used this word. He did not call someone an Indian because he had been born somewhere far along the route to the subcontinent of India or practically there. Nor did he necessarily apply this epithet to someone who could trace his ancestry to an Indian diaspora community that had come from the land of the Indus in the historical past. For him, "Indians" was a broadly inclusive term for many peoples living around the southern extremities of the Red Sea. The Sabaeans or Homerites were Indians, and so were the Dibenī.⁵⁶ The "other Indian land" to which Theophilus went after his visit to Himyar appears to have been Axum, so for him the Axumites, too, were Indians.⁵⁷ There is a geographical aspect to this terminology. The Homerites or Himyarites and the Axumites lived clustered around the southern waters of the Red Sea; presumably the Dibenī, the inhabitants of the Island of Dibous, also called Indians, did as well.

That the peoples of this region were Indians for Philostorgius is confirmed in an odd way when he reports that "the king of the Indians" (ὁ τῶν Ἰνδῶν βασιλεὺς) sent an ape of the kind called "Pan" to Constantius.⁵⁸ As Shahîd argues, this is evidence that the king of the "Indians" here must have been an African or Arabian ruler.⁵⁹ The transport of animals by sea was very difficult, and none of our sources speak of animals being shipped across the Arabian Sea from India. The ferocity of the beast sent to Constantius, which had to be kept in a cage because of its savagery

(ἐν τινι πλέγματι διὰ τὸ θηριῶδες εἰργμένον), suggests a gorilla or a chimpanzee, both creatures native to Africa but not to India.⁶⁰ Thus the king who sent this gift must have ruled in Africa or Arabia.

It is obvious, moreover, from his description of the life and habits of the erstwhile Sabaeans, now called Homerites, and the conclusions he draws from them about their ancestry that for Philostorgius language and culture were also important identifiers of ethnicity.⁶¹ Philostorgius presumably had some evidence that the "Indians" of the Red Sea had these traits in common as well. The Himyarites and Axumites certainly spoke closely related languages and shared long-standing cultural affinities.⁶² It is therefore only to be expected that the inhabitants of the islands that intervened between their countries belonged to the same linguistic and cultural community. The islanders of the Red Sea, at any rate, are far more likely to have been recognizably similar to the Himyarites and Axumites in language and culture than those who lived far out in the Arabian Sea.

Theophilus as Philostorgius's Native Informant

The problem we have set ourselves arises from the fact that the remnants of Philostorgius are vague about the location of the Island of Dibous. But this imprecision may be due less to a careless paraphrase on the part of Photius and more to the negligence of Philostorgius's source. If that source was Theophilus the Indian himself, as seems likely, as a native of Dibous he may have spared little space for details about his home island. Travelers and historians tend to convey the excitement that comes from investigating the new and different by giving detailed descriptions of new discoveries. And by the same token they neglect to provide elaborate reports on what is familiar to them or what they expect to be familiar to their audiences. It may very well be that Philostorgius did not make explicit the location of Dibous because his source, Theophilus, had very little

56 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 2.6, 3.4.

57 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.5, 6.

58 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.11 (Bidez, *Philostorgius*, 41).

59 Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, 104–6. Shahîd further weighs the possibilities that this "king of the Indians" was the king of the island of Dibous, South Arabia, or the Ethiopian Negus, and while he settles on no firm determination, he does conclude, "The identity of the Indians whose king sent an ape to Constantius as possibly Ethiopians or South Arabians fortifies the view put forward in the preceding section II.3 that *Indus* in Theophilus *Indus* could mean Semite." The evidence would, in fact, have allowed him to be a bit more definite.

60 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.11 (Bidez, *Philostorgius*, 41).

61 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.4.

62 In addition to their own Ge'ez scripts, the Axumites borrowed a modified form of the Himyarite Saba'ic script to record inscriptions in their language; C. Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. S. Johnson (Oxford, 2012), 247–332, at 258–59.

to say about it, having all the familiarity on the matter that might be expected of a native.

Philostorgius implies that Theophilus was put in charge of the embassy to the “Indian” nations of the Red Sea littoral because he was a native of the region. By fixing his place of birth on the Farasan Islands, we have suggested that the region Theophilus originally came from was not conceived of in such a broad sense as to embrace the farthest waters of the Arabian Sea all the way to the shores of India, but rather in the narrower sense of the southern reaches of the Red Sea. There is also some indication that—just as Rufinus had an eyewitness source for his account of Frumentius in the person of Aedesius, the brother of Frumentius⁶³—Theophilus may have been ultimately responsible for what Philostorgius had to say of his mission and at certain points let slip a native’s perspective. The strongest hint of this comes when we read that “the Axumites dwell on the left-hand shore of the Red Sea for those coming from without” (ἀλλὰ τὰ ταύτης τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς θαλάσσης ἐν ἀριστερῷ τοῖς ἔξωθεν Αὐξουμίται κατέχουσιν).⁶⁴ It would be more natural for a lifelong inhabitant of the Roman Empire to locate the countries on the Red Sea from the perspective of someone sailing out from the ports of the provinces of Egypt or Arabia Petraea, and so to speak of Axum on the right. The author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, for instance, speaks of travellers setting out from Myos Hormos and describes Berenice and other sites on the African shore of the Red Sea as “on the right” (ἐν δεξιᾷ, ἐκ δεξιῶν).⁶⁵ Situating Axum on the left betrays the perspective of someone more inclined to think of sailing the waters of the Red Sea from some home port around the Straits of Bab al-Mandab and north to the harbors under Roman control. Of course, after spending so long among Romans, Theophilus might have come to think like a Roman, even in regard to the natural directions of travel, but we should not discount the jarring and regressive effect of a visit home after a long absence to reset one’s coordinates, so to speak.

We should expect, moreover, that Theophilus left some record of his expedition. He was not, after

all, a prisoner of circumstance who was inadvertently in a position to advance the cause of Christianity, like Frumentius, but an emissary of the emperor operating on an official mission. He must have been required to file a report of his activities at some point. The extent to which Philostorgius as an “outsider historian” could have had access to official documents may be questioned, but an ambassadorial report that must have read much like a travelogue, as well as an uplifting missionary story, is just the sort of document we should expect to have circulated widely beyond the imperial chancery and very soon after its first submission.⁶⁶ Modern scholars have suggested, moreover, that Philostorgius placed a premium on autopsy in the historiographical process.⁶⁷ If this was indeed the case, he would have been happy to have his account of Theophilus’s expedition straight from the horse’s mouth.



It is, indeed, the testimony of Philostorgius and his putative source—and subject—Theophilus the Indian that allow us to solve the problem of the location of Theophilus’s native country, the island of Dibous. Several alternatives have been put forward over the course of more than two centuries. D. T. Potts, in the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, appears to have pointed the way by identifying Pliny’s *Devade insula* with the Farasan Islands. It is only a short leap to find the island of Dibous in Devade Island. Those who proposed different options with more or less erudition and acumen are hardly to be faulted. The evidence that clinches the case, two inscriptions testifying to the Roman military presence on the Farasans, only came to light very recently. But this epigraphic evidence confirms—rather than creates—the argument for recognizing the Farasan Islands as Dibous. This argument is further confirmed by the reports of the importance of the Farasan Islands in the military and diplomatic affairs of the sixth century.

63 Rufinus, *Hist. eccl.* 10.10.

64 Philostorg., *Hist. eccl.* 3.6 (Bidez, *Philostorgius*, 35).

65 *Peripl. M. Rubr.* 1, 2, 4 (H. Frisk, ed., *Le périple de la Mer Érythrée, suivi d'une étude sur la tradition et la langue*, Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift 33 [Göteborg, 1927], 1, 2).

66 On Philostorgius as an “outsider historian” and the limitations in regard to access to official documents this must have created for him—in contrast to his orthodox contemporaries Socrates and Sozomen—see Argov, “Giving the Heretic a Voice,” 512–13, 514–15.

67 Nobbs, “Philostorgius’ View,” 257; Argov, “Giving the Heretic a Voice,” 509.

Finally, this identification allows us to come to two further conclusions. First, the sphere of activity of Theophilus and his embassy was limited to the lands of South Arabia and Abyssinia and the intervening waters of the Red Sea. It did not extend across the Arabian Sea or encompass the Indian subcontinent and the islands off its coast. Neither the journeys of Theophilus nor the diplomatic objectives of Constantius II were as ambitious as other identifications, such as the island of Diu at the mouth of the Indus or the Maldives, would suggest. This should not be surprising. A visit to these far-off isles would surely have merited a fuller account in Philostorgius's history, which would no doubt have been copied in greater detail by Photius, who regularly exhibits an interest in oriental curiosities.

Second, Philostorgius is consistent in using the word "Indian" to refer to the inhabitants of the region at the far reaches of the Red Sea, which included Himyar, Axum, and the island of Dibous. He did not confuse them with Indians proper, that is, the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent; he simply never mentioned these latter Indians or their country. He thus contributes to our understanding of how the word "Indian" was used in Late Antiquity.

MacEwan University
10700 – 104 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada
GarstadB@macewan.ca